

Mother as Sign

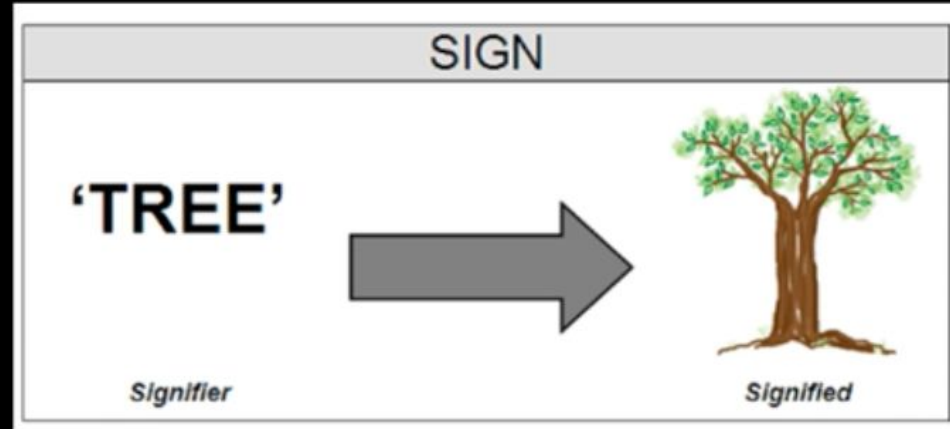
Semiotics Overview

Semiotics

- Study of signifying systems
- Signifying systems are systems that create meaning
- Based in linguistics

Sign: Any specific unit (image) that conveys meaning between two people, made up of signifier and signified

- Signifier: (the words that make up “tree”), vessel, has no meaning by itself but is filled with the signified
- Signified: (the actual tree) physical object you can look at, when you put sound and object together, you get a sign



Cultural Stakes

When somebody says “tree,” we have a collective understanding of what they are saying

- No natural relationship between color red and stopping, or green and going, but they have meaning because they are different and only exist in a system where they both exist and are opposite
- Signs only exist in a larger system of signs
- Even if sign is arbitrary, still has real world consequences (such as ignoring that red is stop)
- Historically and culturally specific
- How do signs create meaning in images?



Woman as Sign

Elizabeth Cowie

- Anthropologist
- Wants to understand relationship between historical experiences of women and the way women are signified, or produce meaning
- Uses semiotics to think about marriage practices in kinship system
- Sees woman as a sign of family alliances, wealth, relationships being created by exchange
- Meaning of exchange is not woman herself, but meaning is relationship between men
- Women are more likely to be used as sign because of lack of societal power than seen as individual

Additional Scholarship

- Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign," m/f 1 (1978): 49-63
- Fletcher Lecture, 2.2: Woman as Sign
- Griselda Pollock, "Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art"
- Patricia Simmons, "Women in Frames"- significance of full frontal address/women as sign in portraits
- Christine Brooke-Rose, "Woman as a Semiotic Object"
- Carolyn M. Byerly, "Woman as Sign"
- Michelle M. Lazar, "Gender, discourse and semiotics: the politics of parenthood representations"
- Cynthia Mott, "Mother and Child: A Study in Symbolic Imagery"